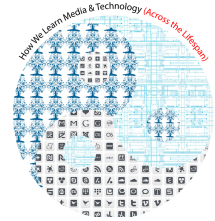




How We Learn (Media & Technology Across the Lifespan)

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HWL Tracer Bullet #5

In the Cage and Web of Culture

Stephen Petrina (2009/2022)

What is culture? If it merely reduces to meaning-making, then it is indistinct from cognition, design, learning, and literacy, also defined as meaning-making. If it subsumes these and other signifying practices, then “culture is everything” (i.e., “the web of everything”).

The Latin *colere* (culture), meaning “to cultivate,” “to dwell,” “to take care” and “to tend and preserve,” is at base about the interdependencies of humans, nature, and spirits (Arendt, 1961; Levin, 1965; Williams, 1976, pp. 87-93). Arendt (1961) found that “as far as Roman usage is concerned, the chief point was always the connection of culture with nature; culture originally meant agriculture, which was held in very high regard in Rome in opposition to the poetic and fabricating arts” (p. 212). Taken together, she says, “culture in the sense of developing nature into a dwelling place for a people as well as in the sense of taking care of the monuments of the past, determine even today the content and the meaning we have in mind when we speak of culture.... Yet the meaning of the word 'culture' is hardly exhausted by these strictly Roman elements” (p. 212). The Greeks did not have this equivalent understanding of culture, nor did they have a word for culture per se. In around 50 BCE, Cicero coined the phrases *excolere animum*, cultivating the mind, and *cultura animi*, cultured mind, to suggest that which makes people “fit to take care of the things [i.e., assemblies or gatherings] of the world” (p. 215).

The concept of *culture* was popularized through Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, published in 1869, and E. B. Tyler’s *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and Primitive Culture*, published in 1865 and 1871. For Arnold, culture means considering people,

their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tones of their voices; look at them attentively; observe the literature they read, the things which give them pleasure, the words which come forth out of their mouths, the thoughts which make the furniture of their minds. (p. 97)

But he also gives it a teleology or purpose, noting that “the whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties” (p. viii). While Arnold gave direction to culture in literary theory, Tyler gave definition to culture for anthropology and ethnology. His *Researches* (1865) refers to culture as “matters important to man in general, for the conduct of his daily life, and the satisfaction of his daily wants, things that come home to men’s ‘business and bosoms’” (p. 190). In *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tyler begins with the definition that marked anthropology for two-thirds of a century: “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art,

morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [hu]man[s] as a member of society” (p. 1).

If culture was liberating for Arnold and Tyler, for others at the same time culture could be a trap. By the turn of the century, it was clear that the trappings of culture and civilization had taken their toll. Weber’s (1906/1930) extensive analysis of culture in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* established sociology as a complement to anthropology in analyses of culture. However, he described “modern culture” as dominating and deterministic— as a “mechanism.” Weber famously concludes:

For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage [stahlhartes Gehäuse]. (p. 181)

Weber was paraphrasing Baxter (1650/1653) from chapter 4 (“Containing Some Hinderances of a Heavenly Life”) of *The Saints Everlasting Rest*: “Keep these things [Earthly or cultural trappings] as thy upper Garments, still loose about thee, that thou mayst lay them by, whenever there is cause” (p. 103). And Baxter was paraphrasing and quoting Paul in 1 Timothy 6:9: “For if once thou come to this, that thou wilt be rich, thou fallest into temptation, and a snare, and into divers[e] foolish and hurtful lusts” [“Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (NIV)]. Here, culture was a devilish or diabolical trap (*laqueum diaboli*).

Although some clothing can feel confining, like a cage as Huck Finn attested (Twain, 1876, p. 270), perhaps Weber should have stuck better with Baxter’s garment analogy and used bedrückend Kettenhemd (i.e., heavy chain-mail or Hauberk) instead of stahlhartes Gehäuse. And instead of “iron cage,” perhaps Parsons should have translated stahlhartes Gehäuse as “shell as hard as steel,” as some have suggested (Baehr, 2001; Kent, 1983). Given that a shell is a light jacket, this analogy would make more sense as ‘shell lined with steel.’ Or, since Gehäuse readily translates into chamber, the better translation for Parsons might have been “iron chamber.”

Early in his career, Geertz turned to *The Protestant Ethic* for direction in his ethnographic analyses. He drew on Weber’s and others’ insights into the meaning-making function of culture, defining it as “an ordered system of meaning and of symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place... Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action” (1957, pp. 33-34). In the early 1970s he proposed the now classic definition of culture. “Believing, with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance [i.e., meaning] he himself has spun,” Geertz (1973) declared, “I take culture to be those webs” (p. 4). Certainly, he seemed to soften up Weber’s “iron cage” or “shell as hard as steel” by interpreting it instead as a “web.”

But webs are not neutral artifacts or metaphors. To be suspended or entangled in a web is to be caught in a stratagem or trap—suspended in a cage of sorts. Whether Geertz was aware, Quarles (1650, 1800) popular depiction of Paul’s warning in 1 Timothy was both a cage and a web. “Thou hadst thy Cage, as well as I,” the accompanying poem asserts. A passage from Anselm’s (ca. 1077) *Proslogion* is also given: “From whence are we expell’d? To what are we impell’d?”



From Quarles *Emblemes* (1635, Book V, Embleme X) and *Quarles' Emblems* (1800, Book V, Emblem X).

Geertz likely had in mind the type of web illustrated in the *Comic Almanack* of 1846 as well as White’s (1959) more innocuous web of relationships depicted in his helpful analysis of “The Concept of Culture.”

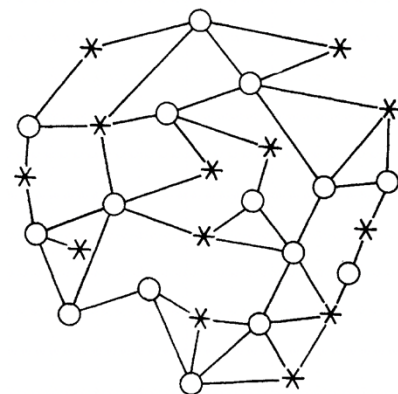
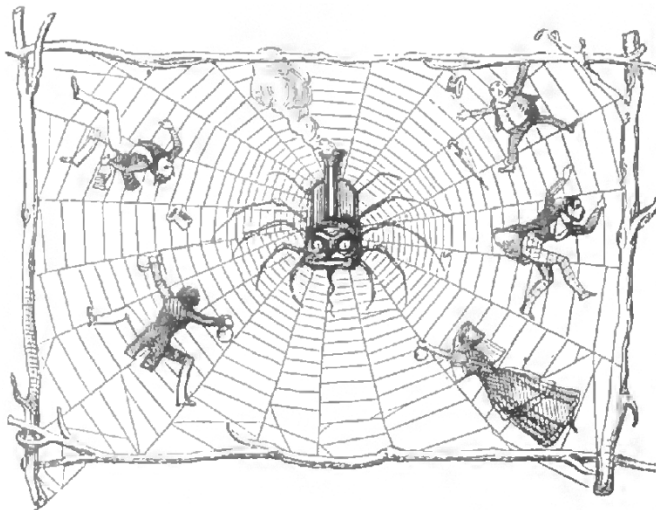


FIG. 3. The locus of culture.

○ = persons

* = objects

— = lines of interaction, or interrelationship

From *Comic Almanack* (1846, p. 132) and White (1959, p. 235).

Hence, by the 1970s, in addition to artifacts, character, customs, ideas, mores, norms, symbols, and values, culture also referred to meaning-making, significance, and understanding (Meissner, 1971). That said, Beals, Hoijer, and Beals's (1977) textbook identifies five major components of any cultural system but meaning-making is not one of these:

- ❑ *A group or society* consisting of a set of members.
- ❑ *An environment* within which the membership carries out its characteristic activities.
- ❑ *A material culture* consisting of the equipment and artefacts used by the membership.
- ❑ *A cultural tradition* that represents the historically accumulated decisions of the membership or its representatives.
- ❑ *Human activities and behaviors* emerging out of complex interactions among the membership, the environment, the material culture, and the cultural tradition. (p. 30)

The meaning-making definition of culture and associations with networks and webs were eventually made common among anthropologists and ethnographers. Nonetheless, Geertz's interpretation of Weber's iron cage as a web has escaped analyses within both anthropology and sociology. For instance, Baehr's (2002) re-translation of *The Protestant Ethic*, with an expansive introduction (155 pp.) and copious notes, makes no mention of Quarles, Geertz, or webs.

With this backdrop, culture for anthropologists and ethnographers was expressed in symbolic forms for communication and making meaning of a local and distant world. Is culture thus just another semiotic and semantic means? This is similar to the way some cultural psychologists define culture. For instance, here a common definition of culture is "the symbolic-expressive aspect of human behavior" (Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kurzweil, 1984/1987, p. 2).

Cultural studies deals with culture a bit differently than anthropology and psychology but is at least partially responsible for the meaning-making definition. In cultural studies, culture is understood broadly as the production and circulation of meaning. This definition is drawn from the extensive work of Hall and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1960s. Although Hall's (1973/1980) "maps of meaning" and "maps of social reality" reflect Geertz's "webs of significance" in defining culture, cultural studies practitioners focused on how culture is assembled and could ostensibly be disassembled. "Think of this process," Hall advised,

in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments — production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a 'complex structure in dominance', sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence.... each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated (pp. 128-129)

The "circuit" of communication that Hall (1973/1980) described was later described as the "circuit of culture" (Du Gay et al., 1997; Johnson, 1983). The circuit is otherwise a network or web.

These definitions suggest the common ways culture is conceptualized: learning and literacy; aesthetic development or design; socialization or acculturation; patterns; worldviews, or symbolic acts; webs of meaning. Culture, then, has various meanings ranging from “whole way of life,” “webs of meaning,” “a ‘tool-kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views,” and “production and circulation of meaning,” or a “toolkit of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action.”¹ This “toolkit” definition is how the sociologist Ann Swindler (1986, p. 273) defines culture. She actually provides a very good analysis of varying definitions.

Basically, the challenge is to avoid:

1. a totalizing of the west, the east, north, or south, etc., recognizing the assembled, diasporic, fused, hybrid, heteroglossia nature of culture at this point in time.
2. a privileging of one form of culture, high, middle, or low, or circulation of meaning over another.
3. an asymmetry of plural cultures and singular nature (alternative is the turn towards natures-cultures).

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¹ Educators tend to interpret culture as multiculturalism and anticipate content that addresses the way different cultures around the world celebrate, tolerate, interact with, and treat diversity and difference. This basically derives from the anthropological sense of the term.

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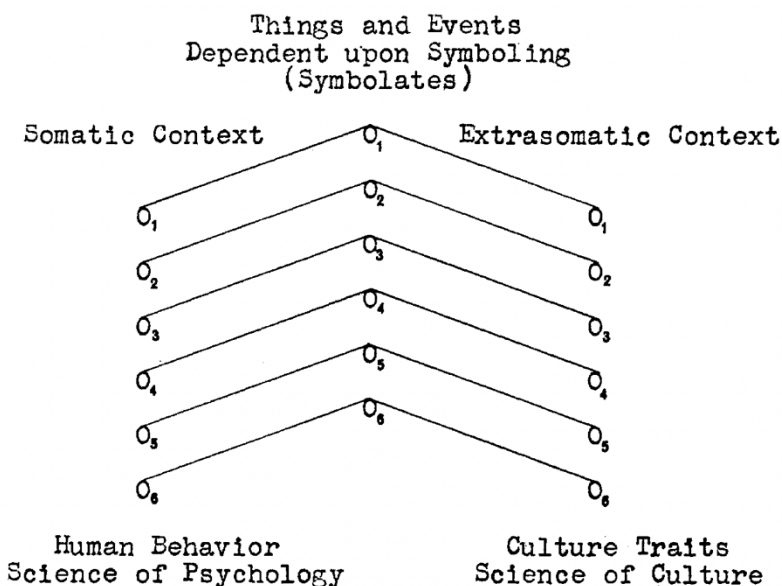
1. What is Culture?

- a. Arnold (1869/1889, pp. viii, xviii): The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.... And then comes M. Renan and says: *'The sound instruction of the people is an effect of the high culture of certain classes. The countries which, like the United States, have created a considerable popular instruction without any serious higher instruction, will long have to expiate this fault by their intellectual mediocrity, their vulgarity of manners, their superficial spirit, their lack of general intelligence'*.... M. Renan seems more to have in view what we ourselves mean by culture.
 - i. (pp. 1, 4): In one of his speeches a short time ago, that fine speaker and famous Liberal, Mr. Bright, took occasion to have a fling at the friends and preachers of culture. 'People who talk about what they call *culture*!' said he contemptuously; 'by which they mean a smattering of the two dead languages of Greek and Latin'.... The disparagers of culture make its motive curiosity; sometimes, indeed, they make its motive mere exclusiveness and vanity. The culture which is supposed to plume itself on a smattering of Greek and Latin is a culture which is begotten by nothing so intellectual as curiosity; it is valued either out of sheer vanity and ignorance, or else as an engine of social and class distinction, separating its holder, like a badge or title, from other people who have not got it. No serious man would call this culture^ or attach any value to it, as culture, at all. To find the real ground for the very differing estimate which serious people will set upon culture, we must find some motive for culture in the terms of which may lie a real ambiguity; and such a motive the word curiosity gives us.
- b. Tyler (1871, p. 1): Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [hu]man[s] as a member of society.
- c. Nietzsche (1874/1997, p. 123): culture can be something other than a *decoration of life*, that is to say at bottom no more than dissimulation and disguise; for all adornment conceals that which is adorned. Thus the Greek conception of culture will be unveiled... the conception of culture as a new and improved *physis*, without inner and outer, without dissimulation and convention, culture as a unanimity of life, thought, appearance and will.
- d. Ogburn (1922/1923, p. 58): Culture may be thought of as the accumulated products of human society, and includes the use of material objects as well as social institutions and social ways of doing things. Hence cultural change is the change in these products.
- e. Kroeber (1937, p. 621): Culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values. Social organization cannot be really understood except as a part of culture; and all special lines of inquiry referring to human activities, human groupings and human ideas and beliefs can meet and become cross fertilized in the comparative study of cultures.
- f. Sapir (1937, p. 156): The content of every culture is expressible in its language and there are no linguistic materials whether as to content or form which are not felt to symbolize actual meanings, whatever may be the attitude of those who belong to other cultures.
- g. Park (1938, p. 191): Attitudes and sentiments, folkways and mores, are the warp and woof of that web of understanding we call "culture." I follow Sapir in the assumption that the essence of culture is understanding.

- h. Kilpatrick (1939, p. 291): The word culture as used in the chapter title is employed, we need hardly say, in the anthropological sense and as such is to be clearly distinguished from an older and more familiar usage where superiority of intellectual and aesthetic taste is implied. According to anthropology, each distinguishable social group has its distinctive culture, embracing all the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that distinguish that group from others.
- i. Frank (1940, p. 492): Culture then, is the process by which man creates and maintains this peculiarly human world and mode of living, built in terms of the ideas and conceptions that he himself has created and imposed upon nature and himself.
- j. Frank (1943, p. 347): Culture, therefore, might be described as the process by which man creates and maintains this peculiarly human world and group way of life, this cultural environment which he imposes upon the geographical and the internal environments, upon nature and himself, in accordance with the basic ideas and conceptions which he himself has developed.
- k. Frank (1944, p. 231): Culture is what man himself, with imagination and artistry, has created as a way of life or design for living, a preferred pattern of organizing and interpreting experience. Culture gives nature and his own living more meaning and tension, more form and significance than organic existence alone could provide. Culture, as traditional beliefs and assumptions and practices, is what man cherishes as his history.
- l. Roheim (1943, pp. 81-82): When looking at the situation from a remote, biological point of view I wrote of culture as a neurosis, my critics objected. Attempting to reply to this criticism I now defined culture with greater precision as a psychic defense system. Since this view has also been questioned, I have taken up the question again in the present book and tried to analyze culture in some of its aspects which are most ego-syntonic, most useful and therefore appear to be remote from defense mechanisms. The result of this investigation is to confirm me in the view that defence systems against anxiety are the stuff that culture is made of and that therefore specific cultures are structurally similar to specific neuroses.
 - i. The culture means then for this discussion all of the manmade part or aspect of the human environment. It includes in particular such things as language, customs, tools, knowledge, ideals, standards, and institutions. If civilized life differs from that of primitive man, it is largely if not entirely because of the different culture that has been accumulated since those early days.
- m. Eliot (1946/1948, p. 120): By 'culture', then, I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion. But these things added together do not constitute the culture, though we often speak for convenience as if they did. These things are simply the parts into which a culture can be anatomised, as a human body can. But just as a man is something more than an assemblage of the various constituent parts of his body, so a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs. These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all.
- n. White (1948, p. 246): mass of extra-somatic tools, institutions, and philosophies.
- o. White (1959, pp. 227-228): The Tylorian conception of culture prevailed in anthropology generally for decades. In 1920, Robert H. Lowie began *Primitive Society* by quoting "Tylor's famous definition." In recent years, however, conceptions and definitions of culture have multiplied and varied to a great degree. One of the most highly favored of these is that *culture is an abstraction*. This is the conclusion reached by Kroeber and Kluckhohn in their exhaustive review of the subject: *Culture: a Critical Review of Concepts and History* (1952: 155, 169). It is the definition given by Beals and Hoijer in their textbook, *An Introduction to Anthropology* (1953:210, 219, 507, 535). In a more recent work, however, *Cultural Anthropology* (1958: 16, 427), Felix M. Keesing defines culture as "the totality of learned,

socially transmitted behavior."... If culture as an abstraction is intangible, imperceptible, does it exist, is it real?... Thus when culture becomes an abstraction it not only becomes invisible and imponderable; it virtually ceases to exist. It would be difficult to construct a less adequate conception of culture.

- p. (p. 231): When things and events dependent upon symboling are considered and interpreted in terms of their relationship to human organisms, i.e., in a somatic context, they may properly be called human behavior, and the science, psychology. When things and events dependent upon symboling are considered and interpreted in an extrasomatic context, i.e., in terms of their relationships to one another rather than to human organisms, we may call them culture, and the science, culturology. This analysis is expressed diagrammatically in Fig. 1.



(234): *Culture, then, is a class of things and events, dependent upon symboling, considered in an extrasomatic context.* This definition rescues cultural anthropology from intangible, imperceptible, and ontologically unreal abstractions and provides it with a real, substantial, observable subject matter. And it distinguishes sharply between behavior-behaving organisms-and culture; between the science of psychology and the science of culture.

- q. (pp. 235-236): *The locus of culture.* If we define culture as consisting of real things and events observable, directly or indirectly, in the external world, where do these things and events exist and have their being? What is the locus of culture? The answer is: the things and events that comprise culture have their existence, in space and time, (1) within human organisms, i.e., concepts, beliefs, emotions, attitudes; (2) within processes of social interaction among human beings; and (3) within material objects (axes, factories, railroads, pottery bowls) lying outside human organisms but within the patterns of social interaction among them. 11 The locus of culture is thus intraorganismal, in terorganismal, and extraorganismal (see Fig. 3).

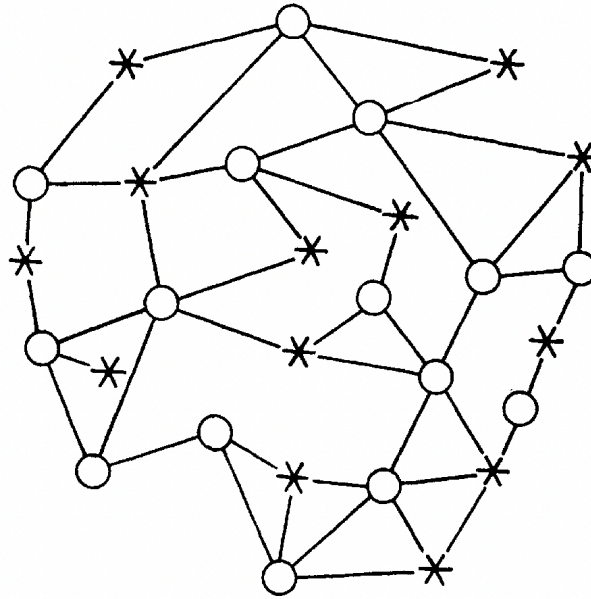


FIG. 3. The locus of culture.

○ = persons
 * = objects
 — = lines of interaction, or interrelationship

- r. Geertz (1973, p. 4): Believing, with Max Weber, that [a hu]man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself [or she herself or they themselves] has spun, I take culture to be those webs.
 - i. Weber (1921/1978, p. 4): Sociology (in the sense in which this-highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. We shall speak of "action" insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his [her or their] behavior— be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is "social" insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.
 - ii. "Meaning" may be of two kinds. The term may refer first to the actual existing meaning in the given concrete case of a particular actor, or to the average or approximate meaning attributable to a given plurality of actors; or secondly to the theoretically conceived *pure type* of subjective meaning attributed to the hypothetical actor or actors in a given type of action. In no case does it refer to an objectively "correct" meaning or one which is "true" in some metaphysical sense.
- s. Geertz (1957, pp. 33-34): One of the more useful ways— but far from the only one— of distinguishing between culture and social system is to see the former as an ordered system of meaning and of symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place; and to see the latter as the pattern of social interaction itself (Parsons and Shils 1951). On the one level there is the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments; on the other level there is the ongoing process of interactive behavior, whose persistent form we call social structure. Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations. Culture and social structure are then but different abstractions from the same phenomena. The one considers social action in respect to its meaning for those

- who carry it out, the other considers it in terms of its contribution to the functioning of SO!Je social system.
- t. Geertz (1973, p. 89): an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols... by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.
 - u. Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kurzweil (1984/1987, pp. 2-3): the symbolic-expressive aspect of human behavior. This definition is sufficiently broad to take account of the verbal utterances, gestures, ceremonial behavior, ideologies, religions, and philosophical systems that are generally associated with the term culture... theorists of culture remain sorely divided on how best to define culture and what aspects of it to emphasize.
 - v. Swidler (1986, p. 273): toolkit of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action.
 - w. Pedriana (1997, p. 638): Geertz (1973, p. 89) defined culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols... by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” Culture includes ideas, values, and beliefs, as well as principles, norms, rules, or schema for behavior. Culture also includes the symbols—material objects as well as spoken and written language—that represent, evoke, and activate social rules, beliefs, and values (Peterson 1979; Sewell 1992; Griswold 1994). There are as many perspectives on culture as there are definitions or aspects of culture (e.g., Wuthnow and Witten 1988). But one useful approach for understanding how culture shapes politics is to treat it as a resource for action (Swidler 1986; Schudson 1989; Williams 1995).
 - x. Giroux (2004, pp. 59-60): circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded, agency is manifested in both individualized and social forms, and discourses are created.
 - y. *Merriam Webster* (2005):
 - ❑ the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially by education;
 - ❑ enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training;
 - ❑ acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills;
 - ❑ the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations;
 - ❑ the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group;
 - ❑ the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes a company or corporation.
 - z. Anderson-Levitt (2012, p. 443-444): Definitions of culture have continued to evolve since Kroeber and Kluckhohn published about 200 of them in 1952; Baldwin et al. (2006) recently listed 300 more. In spite of the diversity of perspectives, most scholars agree on one point, namely, that culture is the opposite of the natural, 'instinctual' or innate. Beyond that, since the cognitive turn of the 1950s and 1960s, many anthropologists have described culture as the making of meaning - meaning being beliefs and norms, understandings and know-how, or 'knowledge' very broadly defined (e.g. Strauss and Quinn 1998; Anderson-Levitt 2002; Fischer 2007), that is, 'the whole of the social processes of signification' (Garcia Canclini 2006, 121).... Defining culture as meaning making, particularly when focusing on practice and process, has many implications for writing about culture in general, and about world culture and its connections to local culture in particular.
 - aa. Fornäs (2017, pp. 52, 81): Roughly since the 1960s, a fourth main definition has crystallised: the hermeneutic concept of culture as signifying practice or meaning making. This hermeneutic concept places meanings at the centre— or rather the making of meanings through signifying practice.... The historical evolution of concepts of culture thus went

through three main phases. First, the open and multifaceted understanding deriving from classical antiquity by the eighteenth century crystallised into a rather coherent ontological idea of civilising cultivation. Then followed in the nineteenth century a bifurcation into anthropological life forms on one hand and aesthetical art forms on the other, in turn intersecting a wide range of other dichotomisations such as agent/structure, subject/object and mind/body. In the mid-twentieth century, the new and reunifying communicative concept of culture slowly emerged, starting with efforts to develop interpretive social theory and eventually resulting in the emergence of a hermeneutic concept of culture as meaning-making.